Tips for Ensuring a Culturally Competent Collaboration

Cultural competence describes the ability of an individual or organization to interact effectively with people of different cultures. It also means being respectful and responsive to the health beliefs, values, practices, and cultural and linguistic needs of diverse population groups[1].

Cultural competence is the starting point for effective collaboration. With it, we become more open to the needs, strengths, and experiences of others. We can better understand who our prospective partners are, what is important to them, and how they view substance misuse in their community. We can gain insight into those cultural factors that may protect against substance use. And we can begin to create a collaborative environment that supports genuine and meaningful engagement, and that is more likely to produce effective approaches to prevention and reduce entrenched disparities.

Cultural competence isn't a quick fix; it can't be accomplished simply by following a set of culturally responsive rules and recommendations. However, here are some tips for beginning the process of increasing the cultural competence of your collaborative efforts:

- **Educate coalition members on issues of equity, inclusion, and disparities.** Be deliberate and don't make assumptions about what people know (or don't know). Provide ongoing capacity-building opportunities to help members understand the importance of patience, meeting people where they are, and truly listening to our partner's perspective; and resources to help them continue to build their cultural competence.

- **Be humble.** Cultural humility can be defined as the "ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the [person]."[2] While education is the foundation for cultural competence, cultural humility requires self-reflection, lifelong learning, and a commitment to correcting injustices.

- **Reach out to culturally relevant organizations to build connections.** For example, if you want to connect with members of a new immigrant population in your community, reach out to organizations that provide services to this group.

---

[1] http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/culture/cultural-competence/culturally-competent-organizations/main

[2] Hook, J. N., Davis, D. E., Owen, J., Worthington Jr., E. L., & Utsey, S. O. (2013). Cultural humility: Measuring openness to culturally diverse clients. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*®. doi:10.1037/a0032595

They can help you identify informal leaders who can in turn help you network with others.

- **Develop policies and practices that support the involvement of all members in coalition activities.** Make sure representatives from underserved populations have a central role in decision-making and are empowered to assume leadership positions and then provided with support in these roles, as needed.

- **Re-consider concepts like "capacity" and "productivity."** We often have a narrow definition of these terms which can prevent us from recognizing and appreciating the contributions of people with skills and experiences that are different from our own. Ask others (coalition members and partners) to identify their strengths and to define what success looks like to them. Keep in mind that success and productivity should reflect the quality—not just the quantity—of our collaborations, relationships, and interactions.

- **Make sure all materials reflect the culture, preferred language, and background of the populations they are meant to serve.** For example, in tribal communities, symbols have significant meaning, as do colors. There are many dialects in the Spanish language; therefore, some terms and their uses can vary depending on the audience's country of origin. Understanding and using the most appropriate terms and phrases for your intended audience helps to ensure that materials are welcomed and not deemed offensive.

- **Be deliberate about getting input.** A core value of prevention practices is that people should have a voice in matters that affect their health and communities. Take time to involve partners in meaningful ways *throughout* the prevention planning process. Create an environment that encourages the honest exchange of ideas and recognizes everyone's contributions. Don't just wait until 'after the fact' to collect input.